

NGONI SOCIETY

881 150

836 emphasized this, and was a reminder of their careful bringing up in
565 their father's village surrounded by their attendant girls and older women.

[533]

Many of the *umsindo* songs referred to well-known events in Ngoni history. Others were warnings against jealousy when living in a polygynous household. One of these, said to be a lament of the women about the difficulties of polygynous households, was very popular in the northern kingdom and was used by Ngoni ministers in the churches when speaking against polygamy, even though the actual words of the song seemed to be referring to a historical event.

● 852

304

The boys and girls went through one common ceremony about the age of seven, when their second teeth were coming. The local tribes practised various forms of scarification, including facial tribal markings. The Ngoni never did this in the past and said that they despised it. Their distinctive marking was the piercing of the ear lobes in order to insert a small piece of reed, or a stud, or some beads. Formerly, when captives were taken in war, or when a village was conquered and annexed, the local people, especially the younger men, were forced to have their ears pierced as a condition of service in the regiments. After the Europeans came, the forcible ear-piercing was resisted by the local tribes, but among the Ngoni, especially those of trans-Zambesi clans, it continued to be practised, and I saw it being carried out in several villages. It was done in the dry cold-weather months, usually by one of the senior women of the children's family or house, and included all the children of about the same age who wanted to have their ears pierced. The woman pierced the lobe with a thorn, or a needle if she had one, and threaded some cotton through the hole. A day or so later they put in tiny bits of grass and replaced these with larger and larger bits until the hole was considered the right size.

[727]

561

857

After this ear-piercing ceremony, the boys' and girls' groups developed on their separate lines until their members became interested in each other as members of the opposite sex. Then, as I said at the beginning of the chapter, the groups of youths and girls were the two most prominent age groups in a village. They paid great attention to their clothes, washed with sweet-smelling leaves, used fats to anoint their hair, and the girls wore bead ornaments in their hair and on neck and wrists. Thus adorned, they spent their leisure time, especially in the cold weather after harvest, visiting other villages, usually in separate groups of youths and girls, except when they went as a team to dance *ngoma* in a neighbouring village.

857

535

In the social life of young people in Ngoni villages, the *ngoma* dance played an important part, especially in the northern kingdom. It took place after the harvest and was organized on a 'village team' basis. The boys practised their dance outside the cattle kraal in the evenings, and the girls did their dancing by themselves as a rule. But on the occasion

VILLAGE LIFE FOR OLDER BROTHERS AND SISTERS

then meant running out of the compound to the freedom of the village. At that time young children might behave outrageously and be punished for it, but they were not held accountable. The nurse girls and the mother, or some other adult, was blamed for letting the child grow up with such an uncontrolled temper or appetite or tongue. Once children were recognized as having passed the young child stage, that is when they had their second teeth, they themselves were held accountable for their behaviour and punished more severely, even though parents were also blamed for careless upbringing. The social sanctions of rebuke and ridicule, which began to operate in the later years of young childhood to only a limited extent, were now seen in their full force, made use of by adults, and still more effectively by the children's own age-mates. The fear of estrangement, of social ostracism as the penalty for failing to conform to the required manners and ways of living, had increasing force as the children grew older. As little children they were buttressed and protected by adults in their childish quarrels with, and moods and attitudes towards, other children. As boys in the dormitory and as girls in the girls' circle they had no longer such protection, and the result was that they became increasingly sensitive to the opinion of their peers. Professor Wilson in her study of Nyakusa age-villages, has called this social awareness the quality known as 'being good company'—getting on well with their contemporaries.

It was at this stage, at the beginning of the children's newly-found independence, that the ear-piercing ceremony took place. In contrast with the neighbouring peoples, the Ngoni had no facial or body markings, and it was the pierced ears which showed they were true Ngoni. In the days of warfare, captives, especially boys and men, were forcibly made to have their ears pierced, and hence a number of men in the Ngoni kingdoms who were not of Ngoni clans were found with pierced ears. Sometimes their children went to their parents and said, 'We want to be made Ngoni now.'

CHILDREN OF THEIR FATHERS

852 Children of Ngoni families, as also these others, chose their
 304 own time to have their ears pierced, though sometimes their
 father or father's sister or father's mother reminded them
 that it was about time. It was nearly always soon after the
 second teeth had come, and children who delayed having it
 done were taunted by their fellows: 'You, are you afraid,
 my age-mate? See my ears already have bone in them.' This
 [237] was a reference to the round plugs of bone inserted when the
 hole was large enough. A bit of thread was put in at first,
 then a small bit of grass, then a fine reed, and finally a bone
 plug. Ear piercing was always done in the cold weather so that
 the lobe of the ear would heal quickly. It was carried out by
 a leading woman of one of the Ngoni families, who watched
 the children to see how they took it. They knew it was a test
 of courage, and however much they were afraid it would hurt,
 [152] they stood like little statues during the operation, with a face
 as set and expressionless as when they were being beaten.

Accountability for individual behaviour was one aspect of
 866 the responsibility which Ngoni adults now began to demand
 868 from children. Another aspect was the performance of their
 allotted tasks. The responsibility for cattle herding was in a
 sense a corporate responsibility of all the boys whose fathers
 owned cattle. The older herd-boys had in fact to answer for
 [233] the condition of the cattle they brought back every evening
 to their owners. They passed on, however, a number of small
 duties, such as care of the calves, sheep and goats, to the
 younger boys, who in turn were held responsible by the older
 boys for performing these duties. The boys' world, centred
 in the dormitory, recognized grades of responsibility from
 which no one escaped.

868 Another facet of responsibility which was at a later stage
 remarked on often by Ngoni adults, was seen in children's
 [517] choice of leisure-time occupations, according to their indi-
 vidual manual and intellectual and artistic capacities. They
 stopped playing childish games and began instead to de-
 velope their skills in making things from local materials.

846 she rises early to go and fasten the belt on the infant. Should the man not have a second wife, the one to put the belt on the child is his (the man's) sister. The man does not immediately see the face of his child; some day these same old women make him take it in his arms [hands]. The father then makes them a present of beads.

854 IV. When they notice the infant is beginning to
 • 852 grow his bottom teeth and to smile at people, the
 301 elders tell the father that, "Now you must bring the child into the village." The child's grandmother ties up beforehand some *lizango*. She begins with a little strip of calico, and rolls it round and round the medicine charm and along with a piece of string; then takes a little piece of skin and sews it over this, and takes some beads and sews them on the skin. The mother cooks some relish beforehand. That evening the husband and wife sleep together (this is "to bring the child into the village.") She cuts off the old belt the child is wearing, and puts on the new one with the *lizango* medicine in it, some more of the medicine, similarly tied up, is placed under the infant's head. In the morning she takes the relish to present to the two old women, and then takes the *lizango* she had placed under the child's head and ties it round his neck, and then takes a belt of beads, interspersed [789] with little wooden charms, and adorns the child. When in time the *lizango* belt breaks, they do not look for it or replace it. In the event of an infant dying before he has been "brought into the village,"

766 they bury it in some open glade, near the edge of some stream, its funeral is attended by women only. Should a man tramp over the spot where the child [753] is buried, he "has taken" the disease known as *nyesi*. Such a grave is known as *nsenye*.